

## **Narrating Witchcraft: Agency, Discourse and Power**

**Veranstalter:** Max-Weber-Kolleg für kultur- und sozialwissenschaftliche Studien; Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning „cults“ and „polis religion“

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**Bericht von:** Richard Gordon, Max-Weber-Kolleg Erfurt

Once a staple of UK African anthropology, witchcraft became a non-topic with the debate over ‘magic’ in the 1970s. But the irresistible rise of witch-finding movements all over sub-Saharan Africa, among many other events, made the topic of such beliefs, and their major vehicle, witchcraft narratives, an increasingly important focus of current anthropological research. Post-modern approaches to narrative mean that we no longer need to decide about ‘truth’ or ‘falsehood’ but can be content with negotiation, ragged ends, and variable strategies in complex social situations. Early-modern historians are exploring similar approaches to their trial material. Given this background ESTHER EIDINOW (Erfurt) and RICHARD GORDON (Erfurt), both historians of antiquity, set up an international conference at the end of the Summer semester 2016 within the framework of the ERC ‘Lived Ancient Religion’ project, directed by Jörg Rüpke and Rubina Raja, to explore the possible extra-value provided by a comparative perspective on such narratives. To that end, we invited ten international speakers: an African anthropologist, three early-modern historians, an expert on Kabbalah, two authorities on the ancient Near East (Babylonia, Egypt), two commentators on early Christian material, and a philologist.

Given the differences between the types and extent of the primary material available in these different historical periods, the contributors played to their strengths. PETER GESCHIERE (Amsterdam) emphasized the moral ambiguity of healers/witches in the territory of eastern Cameroon, the waves of new fashions and crazes of mystical protection, the ceaselessly inventive bricolage of new witchcraft narratives, and the fears of attacks emanating from one’s own fam-

ily expressed in the new rumours of zombie-workers. He also underlined the need, if we are to do comparative research at all, to ignore minor differences between different areas and periods and look for dominant patterns. Above all, ‘witchcraft’ is not an explanation, as is so often claimed, but a black hole requiring to be filled. MARION GIBSON (Exeter) used two of the English witchcraft pamphlets arising from trial-proceedings, a genre that exists nowhere else, to show how variable the narratives relating to the self-same case might be. Stories of witchcraft events and the roles adopted in them by the principals are/were in constant flux in accordance with the short-term needs of the tellers, to say nothing of the judges and the pamphlet-writers, so that there never could be a ‘final’ version. ALISON ROWLANDS (Essex) used the extensive documentation from Rothenburg ob der Tauber concerning the case of Margaretha Horn (1652) to provide a memorable account of one peasant woman’s long struggle to resist an accusation of witchcraft. Here again, the elusiveness of the charge, the ambivalence of every claim and every item of evidence, and the central importance of framings were beautifully brought out. WOLFGANG BEHRINGER (Saarbrücken) showed how the authors of demonological treatises manipulated narratives they found in trial records in order to fit their own truth and fully appreciated the value of such ‘first-hand’ mini-narratives in granting credibility to their demonological scenarios.

The evidence available for the ancient Near East offers virtually no witchcraft narratives of these types, though they surely once existed, yet a comparative perspective enables us to draw out certain common themes. Thus GRETA VAN BUYLAERE (Würzburg) showed that suspicion of one’s own family was characteristic of witchcraft-fears in Babylonia while direct accusation was avoided by ‘materialising’ the witch as a figurine that could then be destroyed, and that from the mid-second millennium the ‘standard-image witch’ becomes female. SVENJA NAGEL (Würzburg) suggested that private witchcraft attacks seem to have been adapted from temple recipes, while the very existence of textual amulets suggests that fear of witchcraft was

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relatively widespread. We know that wise-folk existed but cannot estimate their role, which in other societies is of key importance.

In the case of the Graeco-Roman world, ESTHER EIDINOW (Nottingham / Erfurt) raised the gender-question in relation to the trials of women, especially metics (i.e. resident but foreign) in fourth-century BCE Athens: Viri-local marriage and widespread concubinage meant that women, the Other inside, might easily be the target of accusations particularly in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War. RICHARD GORDON (Erfurt) emphasised the many different forms of what we can broadly call witchcraft narratives in the Roman Empire, the value of the impalpability of 'magic', and the ability of actors in fraught situations to create narratives adapted to their strategic aims. JAN BREMMER (Groningen / Erfurt) showed how the figure of Simon Magus ballooned in the Christian *imaginaire* from the mid-first to the early third century acquiring ever more fantastical contours, while ALMUTH LOTZ (Potsdam) contrasted the ability of top-class rhetors in the late-antique eastern Mediterranean to use accusations of witchcraft to emphasise their own status with the Christian saint whose intervention spreads an idealized harmony in a divided village.

Perhaps the most curious case was that produced by YUVAL HARARI (Negev): the evidence of several curses written by Kabbalists to kill Hitler and other leading Nazis in the dangerous period of Rommel's advance on Cairo in 1942 before the first battle of El Alamein. If such curses were produced by rabbis, they were not considered 'magic' but as the effective use of divine power. This point emphasizes the relationality of all such narratives, the need for finer contextualizations, and the awareness of the levels of 'interference' that go into their construction. But, as Geschiere emphasised so forcefully, there is always the big story, the wider situation, which gives such narratives their social power.

#### Conference overview:

Peter Geschiere (Amsterdam): The Historicity of Witchcraft Narratives – Examples from the Forest Region of South Cameroon

Esther Eidinow (Nottingham): Social Knowledge and Spiritual Insecurity: Identifying 'Witchcraft' in Classical Greek Communities

Alison Rowlands (Essex): Contested Narratives, Contesting Identities: Witchcraft Narratives in Legal and Social Context in Early Modern Germany

Richard Gordon (Erfurt): Knowing the Ropes: Malign Magic in Latin Literary Narratives

Marion Gibson (Exeter): Narrating Witchcraft in Early Modern English News Pamphlets

Almuth Lotz (Potsdam): Libanius and Theodoret of Cyrrhus on Accusations of Magic: Between Legal Norm and Legal Practice in Late Antiquity

Olivier Dufault (LMU, Munich): Witchcraft Accusations Directed at Client-Scholars under the Roman Empire

Wolfgang Behringer (Saarbrücken): Witchcraft Narratives in Early Modern Demonologies from the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) to Francesco Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum* (1626)

Greta Van Buylaere (Würzburg): Foreign Witches

Svenja Nagel (Heidelberg): All is Fair in Love and War: Egyptian Witchcraft and

Sexual Dynamics in Graeco-Roman Egypt

Jan Bremmer (Groningen): Simon Magus: a Pagan Magician in a Christian Context

Yuval Harari (Ben Gurion): Three Charms for Killing Adolf Hitler: Practical Kabbalah in WW2

Tagungsbericht *Narrating Witchcraft: Agency, Discourse and Power*. 30.06.2016–01.07.2016, Erfurt, in: H-Soz-Kult 02.02.2017.